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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TUNIS 000962

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STATE FOR S, S/ES, NEA AND NEA/MAG FROM AMBASSADOR

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PMIL PHUM TS

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO TUNISIA

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Madame Secretary, my team and I look forward to your visit to Tunis. President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdallah are delighted you are coming and will provide a warm welcome. They will want to hear your thoughts on regional issues and to reaffirm strong US-Tunisian relations. For us, your visit is an opportunity to welcome Tunisia's moderation and its economic and social progress. We recommend you stress the value of our excellent, long-standing ties, but add that more is possible. If the Tunisians make progress on US concerns, we would be ready to respond in ways that address Tunisian interests.

¶2. (C) Specifically, your visit will allow you to:  
-- welcome Tunisia's moderate positions on key regional priorities while seeking greater GOT engagement;  
-- commend recent progress on counterterrorism cooperation, but urge further steps;  
-- ask Ben Ali for assurances on humane treatment for past and future detainees transferred from Guantanamo;  
-- underscore the need for more political reform against the backdrop of Tunisia's 2009 presidential and legislative elections; and,  
-- offer the GOT an additional \$4.1 million in military assistance that will help in the fight against terrorism.  
End Summary.

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Background  
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¶3. (C) Tunisia styles itself "a country that works". Ben Ali and other Tunisian leaders often contrast their successes with the problems elsewhere in the region. There is much in what they say. While Tunisians grumble privately about corruption by the First Lady's family, there is an abiding appreciation for Ben Ali's success in steering his country clear of the instability and violence that have plagued Tunisia's neighbors. Recent events have underscored this accomplishment and the continuing threat: Tunisian security forces took down a terror cell in December 2006-January 2007; we were reportedly among the group's targets. In late February, al-Qaeda in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) kidnapped two Austrian tourists who were in the desert along the Tunisian-Algerian border.

¶4. (C) Tunisians also widely recognize, and welcome, the country's social successes. Tunisia is a model for the region on women's rights; its 1956 Personal Status Code abolished polygamy and required consent for marriage, among other protections. Women today play an important role in the public and private sectors.

¶5. (C) There is also real economic progress. GDP growth has averaged five percent over the past decade, and the Tunisian people enjoy a relatively high standard of living. About 80 percent of Tunisians are considered middle class, and live in family-owned homes. Notwithstanding the progress, unemployment remains very high, officially estimated at 14 percent. But it is generally acknowledged to be higher in certain regions and much higher in the 20-30 age bracket, particularly among university graduates. The average Tunisian's purchasing power is under pressure due to world commodity price increases. These strains have manifested themselves most acutely through protests and arrests in the southern mining basin of Gafsa province. The GOT responded with a very heavy show of force.

¶6. (C) In the political arena, however, progress is barely perceptible. Ben Ali announced recently that he would be running for a fifth term in Tunisia's next elections, most likely in October, 2009. There is no chance the elections will be free or fair; freedom of expression and freedom of association are severely constrained, and independent opposition parties are not allowed to operate effectively. Indeed, one authentic opposition candidate is no longer eligible to run, due to a recent constitutional amendment. When asked about political freedom, Ben Ali will insist the GOT is making progress, but that it takes time. He may point to such steps as the lifting of the prior review of books and newspapers. While welcome, the GOT has often found ways to limit the impact of such advances.

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President Ben Ali and Foreign Minister Abdallah

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¶7. (C) President Ben Ali will welcome your visit and meeting. He will wish to spend much time on regional issues, including developments in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran and Mauritania. He may also emphasize, as he has done in other recent discussions, that US-Tunisian political ties are strong, but that we should do more to deepen our economic links. If Ben Ali is "on his game," he will be affable, open and engaged. Ben Ali will have just turned 72, however. He reportedly has health problems and they may affect the quality and tenor of the meeting.

¶8. (C) Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah is delighted that you are coming. He speaks fondly of his previous interactions with you, including during his June, 2007 visit to Washington and at the Annapolis Conference. Abdallah can be charming in meetings, but he rarely departs from standard GOT talking points. He has been known to open his meetings with lengthy soliloquies about Tunisia's political, social, and economic successes and moderate positions on regional issues. This is the spin that Abdallah himself crafted during his years as Presidential Advisor responsible for domestic media control and international media spin. During his three-year tenure as Foreign Minister, Abdallah has maintained significant influence -- if not control -- over the local media.

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International/Regional Issues  
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¶9. (C) Tunisia is like-minded on Iran, recognizes the importance of restoring stability in Iraq before the Coalition departs, and backs the Annapolis negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The GOT has maintained its Embassy in Iraq with a Charge d'Affaires, and has provided some training to GOI officials. However, the GOT assiduously avoids getting out in front of the Arab League consensus on most foreign policy issues. Moreover, when other interests are at stake, the GOT is prone to waffle. Ben Ali surprised us by attending the Arab League summit in

Damascus this spring, after telling A/S Welch that he would not go.

¶10. (C) It is not clear that the GOT has a guiding principle for its foreign policy other than to "get along with everyone." The GOT has declined to condemn publicly the coup d'etat in Mauritania, although it has signaled its private objection. Likewise, it has been silent on Russia's recent military actions in Georgia. To the extent that GOT leaders speak in generalities about their moderate foreign policy stance, we remind them that Tunisia's moderation does not help us, unless its views are made public and its influence is used actively in international fora.

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Guantanamo Detainees  
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¶11. (S) Based on humane treatment and security assurances provided by the GOT, the United States transferred two Guantanamo detainees in June, 2007. Following the transfer, credible allegations surfaced that one of the detainees was mistreated while in Ministry of Interior custody (slapped and threatened with rape as well as the rape of his wife and daughter). In February, A/S Welch raised the return of detainees with Ben Ali. Ben Ali provided the somewhat vague response that they would be accepted in accordance with the Tunisian Constitution. Your visit represents an opportunity to confirm that past and future transferees will be treated in accordance with Tunisia's constitutional guarantees on human rights and humane treatment, as well as its international commitments, notably the Convention Against Torture.

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Counterterrorism/Security Cooperation  
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¶12. (C) Tunisian officials are rightfully concerned about the terrorism threat posed by violent extremists. As Tunisians often tell us, they "live in a bad neighborhood". Indeed, the core members of the terror cell the GOT took down in January, 2007 had infiltrated from Algeria. But the cell then recruited from the local population, mushrooming from four to 40 people in just six weeks. The GOT's success in taking down the group was welcome, but there is clearly some support for extremist ideologies among Tunisians. We would like to help the GOT deal with this, but it would require the

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GOT to admit there is a domestic problem, and to share knowledge about its extent. That is not happening: the GOT maintains that the threat of terrorism in Tunisia is due to external factors, whether border infiltrations or incitement broadcast on pan-Arab satellite TV.

¶13. (S/NF) Tunisian cooperation in the intelligence arena has been uneven. On the positive side, we have some successful programs being run through GRPO. We also have good intelligence sharing on Tunisians who are outside the country. On the negative side, however, intelligence sharing on the threat inside Tunisia is thin, although it has improved somewhat in recent months. The improvements are probably in response to a commitment made by President Ben Ali to A/S Welch in February to cooperate on counterterrorism "without reservation."

¶14. (C) The GOT places a high value on its historic and robust military-military relationship with us. In FY 2008, Tunisia is receiving approximately \$8 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), nearly all of which is used for maintenance of its aging of US-origin equipment, which needs major upgrades. In addition to FMF, the Mission received almost \$10 million in Section 1206 funding in FY 2008. We are using the funding to provide the Tunisian military with night-vision goggles and ground surveillance radar. We also

have a robust program of military exercises and training with the Tunisians.

¶15. (C) You will be able to inform the GOT that we can provide \$4.1 million in Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) funds (originally intended for Mauritania) to meet GOT requests for unmanned aerial vehicles, night vision equipment for Tunisia's UH-1H helicopters, and associated training. The Administration has proposed approximately \$2 million in FMF in FY 2009 for Tunisia. GOT leaders view FMF as a barometer of the US commitment to Tunisia, and thus have complained about cuts in FMF levels in recent years. We have told them that we continue to seek ways to help their military combat the threat of regional terrorism. We have traded texts on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), but the GOT has not replied to our latest draft delivered over a year ago. In a meeting with Minister of Defense Morjane in May, Secretary Gates noted the United States would like to complete a SOFA with Tunisia.

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Economic Ties  
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¶16. (C) Ben Ali and other Tunisian officials frequently call for greater US economic engagement, by which they mean more investment. Today, some 70 US companies are operating in Tunisia, with close to \$1 billion in investment since 1994. Trade between the two countries remains small, with agricultural commodities the largest US export to Tunisia. In March, we held a meeting of our Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) council and discussed intellectual property, services, market access, and investment. One key to improving US trade and investment is a further opening up of Tunisia's economy. Notably, Tunisia still does not permit most types of franchising, although they are working on a new services law.

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Bilateral Engagement  
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¶17. (C) While we enjoy a long-standing and generally positive bilateral relationship with Tunisia, difficulties remain. The GOT is slow to engage, often unresponsive, and periodically takes counterproductive steps. Most recently, the GOT rejected all nine American Fulbright Scholars planning study here this coming year. Strong reclamas resulted in the GOT accepting four scholars, but the process was tough. Underlying some GOT actions is a distrust of our motives, and specifically the Freedom Agenda. GOT leaders bristle at public criticism. For example, Abdallah convoked me to express his "disgust" that Tunisia was condemned for its treatment of journalists in President Bush's May 1 statement on World Press Freedom. But the difficulties are also the result of the controls imposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These controls limit the Embassy's ability to engage with other agencies, and with universities, business organizations and even the country's labor union. While these restrictions affect all Embassies, not just ours, the effect is to limit the quality and depth of our relations.

¶18. (C) In our contacts with Tunisian officials, they

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emphasize our strong ties of over 200 years. But they rarely move from the general to the specific. Your visit is an opportunity to make clear that more is possible. If Tunisia is prepared to open up and do more on issues of concern to the United States, e.g., regional challenges and/or political liberalization, we are prepared to look for ways to deepen our relationship.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:  
<http://www.state.sgov/p/nea/tunis/index.c fm>

